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THE MESSAGES OF EZEKIEL TO THE HUMAN HEART.

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EZEKIEL was a seer. God spoke often to him through visions. He received his commission as a prophet through an elaborate and, from an artistic point of view, almost grotesque apocalypse of cherubim. He preached repeatedly through symbols. He delighted in allegory and weird mythology. He emphasized ritual and ceremony, and gave an elaborate program for the outward form of Israel's religious life. He was a priest and exhibits the tendencies of a solitary theologian. His writings thus are often obscure, dull, and uninteresting from repetition and a suppression of the human element and of pictures of real life. God is introduced working almost mechanically in his visions of the future. Yet, in spite of these facts Ezekiel speaks powerfully to man, and I have been asked by the editors of the *BIBLICAL WORLD* to give his messages to the human heart.

The first of these messages is found in Ezekiel's conception of God, which is grand and thrilling. In the wonderful vision of the cherubim¹ the divine transcendence is clearly emphasized. We behold an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent being, of inexpressible majesty and glory. We are lifted into an inspiring realm of metaphysical thought, finely expressed, for example, in "Faber's Hymns of God and the Most Holy Trinity":

Timeless, spaceless, single, lonely,
Yet sublime Three,
Thou art grandly, always, only
God in unity !
Lone in grandeur, lone in glory,
Who shall tell thy wondrous story,
Awful Trinity ?

¹ Chap. I.

Speechless, without beginning,
 Sun that never rose,
 Vast, adorable, and winning,
 Day that hath no close !
 Bliss from thine own glory tasting,
 Ever-living, everlasting,
 Life that never grows !

These thoughts we need. It is a fashion now to decry them as useless imaginings, mere verbal expressions, adding nothing to our knowledge. They are, however, a help to a real understanding of God. They make an appeal to our religious nature, and Ezekiel has given them, under Old Testament limitations, in his complex description of the cherubim. The prophet then advances the great truth that "Jehovah in all his action is self-centered, the supreme motive of all his dealings with men, whether in mercy or in judgment, being the manifestation of his own Godhead." This is expressed in the oft-repeated phrase: "And ye shall know that I am the Lord."² All of Jehovah's acts are for his name's sake. In the glorious promise of the future he says: "I work not for your sake, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name."³ The Creator is thus exalted above the creature; the first, primary end of all divine action is in God himself. The manifestation of his name or his glory is the object sought. This doctrine may be made repellent, as though God were selfish, but in the light of the divine character it becomes our greatest joy and consolation. It is far better for man that he should be dealt with for the sake of God, for the sake of the manifestation of the divine wisdom and love in which the divine glory consists, than for the sake of any good that may be found in him. This fact Ezekiel apparently felt very strongly, and he justifies the position by touching pictures of divine love and compassion. The background of these pictures is the sin and apostasy of Israel. No previous prophet equals him in his delineation of the sinfulness of the chosen people. The earlier prophets saw in the beginnings of Israel a golden age of communion with Jehovah. Ezekiel saw nothing good in their entire past. From the first and all through their history they

² 6 : 7 ; 7 : 4 ; 11 : 10, 12, etc.

³ 36 : 22 ; cf. 20 : 9.

had been a perverse and ungrateful people, yet they were to be saved. After the judgment through which they were passing would come the divine redemption. These facts are reiterated in many discourses, but are especially brought out in the beautiful allegory of the abandoned babe, taken, nourished, reared, and wedded by its benefactor. Here the love of Jehovah especially shines forth. Israel had had nothing in the past to recommend her, and yet Jehovah had entered into covenant with her, lavished favors upon her, making her his bride. She, however, played the harlot, and, though the judgment of an adultress must be inflicted upon her, yet in the end a new and everlasting covenant is to be made, and she is to be forgiven for all that she has done.⁴

Ezekiel thus repeats, deepens, and intensifies the story of love given by Hosea, since Israel's sin is not only the infidelity of an unfaithful wife, but with this infidelity the base ingratitude of an unfilial foster-child; yet all this heinousness is forgiven through the gracious purpose of Jehovah for his own glory. Another picture of divine love is seen in the appearance of Jehovah as the good shepherd restoring Israel unto himself. "For thus saith the Lord God: Behold! I myself, even I, will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will deliver them out of all places whither they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day." "I will seek that which was lost, and will bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick."⁵ Thus the love of God is wondrously taught by Ezekiel.

No prophet also equals him in his message of hope. Through divine grace the dead may live. This appears in the vision of the valley of dry bones.⁶ While primarily concerned with a national resurrection, this vision shows that, however past redemption a man may seem from a human point of view, yet God, by his gracious spirit, can still save. His sovereign grace is irresistible. I know of nothing equal to this to comfort a father

⁴Chap. 16.

⁵34: 11 f., 16.

⁶37: 1-14.

or a mother in reference to the ultimate reclamation of a wayward child. This same blessed hope of final salvation is suggested even more clearly in Ezekiel's promise of the restoration of "Sodom and her daughters." These cities of the plain in the Old Testament are not only examples of those most deserving divine judgment for their wickedness, but also of those who have incurred such judgment and have been utterly destroyed; and yet Ezekiel predicts their restoration along with that of Israel."⁷ This proclaims a purpose of divine salvation reaching unto the uttermost.

"Ah! grace into unlikeliest hearts,
It is thy boast to come,
The glory of thy light to find
In darkest spots a home."

Christ not improbably had in mind this reference to Sodom when he stated that it would be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than Capernaum in the day of judgment.⁸

These restorations are accomplished directly by God. He causes breath to enter the dry bones and clothes them with flesh. A complete change of nature is also wrought through him, for he says: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and ye shall be my people and I will be your God."⁹ Thus Ezekiel teaches that all future redemption is a divine act. The sinner cannot save himself. God is the author of his salvation. This is a truth recognized by the heathen. Plato puts it in the mouth of Socrates, who, in reply to the assertion of Alcibiades that one may avoid the inordinate motions of his own mind by his own will, said: "Thou speakest not rightly, say if God will." Seneca says: "Our corrupt nature has drunk in such deep draughts of iniquity, which are so far incorporated in its bowels that you cannot remove it save by tearing them out." And he also says: "No man is able

⁷ 16:53 ff.

⁸ Matt. 11:24.

⁹ 36:26-28.

to clear himself; let someone give him a hand; let someone lead him out." Ovid joins in the same confession: "If I could I would be more sane. But some unknown force drags me against my will. Desire draws me one way, conviction another. I see the better and approve. The worse I follow."¹⁰ Paul and Ezekiel also are strikingly alike in their teachings. "The same conceptions and the same order belong to both: forgiveness, regeneration, a new heart and spirit, the spirit of God as the ruling power in the new life, and the issue of this the keeping of the requirements of God's law."¹¹

Such is the wonderful gospel of Ezekiel. God forgives, regenerates, and maintains the people in their new life with him. But, while Ezekiel thus magnifies the divine part in salvation, he lays not less stress upon the human. He thinks of no individual being saved without individual effort, and no prophet enforces more strongly the doctrine of human responsibility. This is his second great message. Man's destiny is determined by himself; if he is lost, it is his own fault. This truth the prophet approaches from the side of divine judgment and to justify the ways of God to man. He repudiates the teaching that man is condemned for any sins but his own, and declares that whenever the wicked shall forsake his evil ways he shall live and not die.¹² The iniquity of a father shall not condemn a son, neither shall a father's righteousness save a child. Everyone shall be judged according to his own ways. Thus the freedom of the human will is emphasized, and the prophet who represents the new heart as a gift of God likewise proclaims: "Return ye, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; wherefore turn yourselves and live."¹³ Man also is responsible not only for his own fate, but may likewise be responsible for the fate of others. This fact appears in the

¹⁰ These references to classical authors are from BUSHNELL'S *Nature and the Supernatural* (New York, 1859), pp. 243 f.

¹¹ DAVIDSON'S *Commentary on Ezekiel*, p. 266. ¹² Chap. 18. ¹³ 18:30-32.

discourse concerning the watchman, of whom, if he fail to warn the people, the blood of those who perish will be required. This teaching of Ezekiel is usually applied, most properly, to ministers of the gospel. There is no more heart-searching and fundamental charge to the ministry of Christ than Ezek. 33: 1-9. "What is called the preaching to the age may be a very poor and empty thing if it is forgotten that the age is made up of individuals each of whom has a soul to save or lose. What shall it profit a man if a preacher teaches him how to win the whole world and lose his own life? It is fashionable to hold up the prophets of Israel as models of all that a Christian minister ought to be. If that is true, prophecy must be at least allowed to speak its whole lesson, and amongst other elements Ezekiel's consciousness of responsibility for the individual life must receive due recognition."¹⁴ But this responsibility is not confined to Christian ministers. It belongs not less to parents, to teachers, to brothers and sisters; indeed to all men. Every man has an influence upon which the eternal destiny of some individual may depend. In some degree each one of us is responsible for the fate of a brother-man.

To Ezekiel's feeling of human responsibility we may attribute the closing visions of his book. Chaps. 40-48 contain probably a program for a new constitution for Israel. In spite of the prophet's assurance that Jehovah would give his people a new heart, enabling them to keep his judgments and do them, he still evidently felt very strongly the necessity of an institutional life whereby the people might be kept in the way of holiness. Such concern may appear paradoxical in view of their inward transformation. But it illustrates rather the breadth of vision of the prophet. Although redemption was a gift of God, although Israel was to stand forever secure, the hosts of Gog and Magog not being able to prevail against her, yet this future demanded on Israel's part a reconstructed system of worship and of civil life which should guard against the mistakes and sins of the past. Jehovah, although loving, gracious, and forgiving, was not a God to be worshiped and revered with carelessness and

¹⁴ *The Book of Ezekiel*, by REV. JOHN SKINNER, M.A. (New York, 1895), pp. 302 ff.

unconcern. Great stress, therefore, was laid by the prophet upon form and ceremony. The history of Judaism shows that, while this tendency was providential and preserved the Jewish church during the troublous centuries from the restoration to the advent of Christ, yet it led in the end to a decay of spiritual worship. In spite, however, of this fact, we must recognize the great truth taught by the prophet in his scheme for the future, that a regenerated life, whether of an individual or a nation, must find expression in institutional forms.

Ezekiel gives thus two great messages for the human heart. The first is that the infinite God will accomplish for his own glory the salvation of man; the second, that man's salvation depends upon his turning unto God. Do these messages appear contradictory? They were not to the prophet and are not in human experience. The heart of man receives and rejoices in them both.